

FANCY DELANCEY STARBUCKS BOHEMIA: The New Museum and the New Lower East Side Gallery Scene

by Ed McCormack

To someone who actually grew up around here and can remember when people built pigeon coops rather than penthouses on tenement rooftops, the very idea of a Starbucks on Delancey Street still seems almost surreal. But there it is, right on the corner of Allen and Delancey, not far from that other glaring incongruity: Bernard Tschumi's glass-fronted "Blue Building," one of several residential towers and designer hotels newly risen amid all manner of recent renovations, extensions, and architectural anomalies hastily grafted onto the downtown skyline—aesthetics be damned!

At least Sol Moscot Opticians ("Since 1915") and Jimmy Jazz homeboywear are still standing on the corner of Orchard and Delancey. But another condo monstrosity is going up on the old site of Dunkin Donuts and the 99C Store, within spitting distance of where the big yawning yap of the Williamsburg Bridge swallows and regurgitates traffic to and from another former slum in Brooklyn that has likewise morphed into high-end haven for creative hipsterism.

"What's missing from the American underground?" the novelist Bruce Benderson asked rhetorically in an essay called "Toward the New Degeneracy." "Not publicity or funding, but vital links to the culture of poverty." Yet any of the aspiring performance artists ensconced in Starbucks, tapping away at their laptops or conferring with their agents on their cells between sips of skinny latte, would be conversant with at least the historical fact of poverty on the Lower East Side. You can't avoid it, the way the local color has been exploited since the clubs, boutiques, and art galleries started opening and the condos started going up down here.

As soon as it became clear that the Lower East Side was going to be The Next Big Thing, pictures of teeming tenement streets, crowded with pushcarts back in the day, became prominent in the local decor, and the real estate sharks started brainstorming for a marketable acronym. First they floated "Lolito" (as in SoHo and Nolita) to the media, and it turned up in an article here and there but somehow didn't stick. The Lower East Side Business Improvement District (BID) got in on the act with "LES," just the initials, which look great on a T-shirt. Then some genius came up with the slogan "LES is More. Explore." And suddenly my funky old neighborhood had spanking new corporate logo.

Lately, style pieces about LES and shoppers' guides to its goodies—from the bialys at Kossar's to the pickles at Guss's to the designer dresses and shoes at Narnia—have been appealing everywhere, always with a nostalgic angle, as in the AM New York headline, "Echoes of Old Clash With Hip." A far cry from Stewart Meyer's 1984 novel "The Lotus Crew," with lines like "Delancey Street crackled shameless like a neon leper colony," Richard Price's new book "Lush Life" nails the neighborhood's newfound mix of historical self-consciousness and artsy attitude. Hawking Jacob Riis prints from the 1880s to a club owner, one character spritzes, "The man was light years ahead of his time, total multimedia."

Even the pilot issue of Page Six, the New York Post's slick new life-style supplement for the clueless, featured an article called "Prima Gallerinas," all about how in the "exciting new gallery scene on the Lower East Side, an emerging group of women is taking the spotlight."

If the East Village scene of the 1980s was driven by a desire to create an alternative to the art establishment, the stampede to the Lower East Side started with the news that the establishment was building a branch downtown.

"When I heard the New Museum was opening on the Bowery, I knew we had to be close to that action," says one of the "Prima Gallerinas," Fabienne Stephan, director of Salon 94, at 1 Freeman Alley, off Rivington Street, a satellite of the Upper East Side gallery of the same name. Curiously yet predictably, other established venues have not been above following the action, including Woodward Gallery, formerly of Soho, which recently featured an exhibition of Deborah Claxton's exquisitely intricate collages in its large, almost incongruously clean space at 133 Eldridge Street. Perhaps to lend it an edginess in keeping with the new locale, they called the show "Extreme Paper".

More what one might expect in these hot yet still raw environs is Envoy, at 131 Chrystie Street, where we saw Brandon Herman's five-foot-high cast-fiberglass cartoon cat-head and Michael Yinger's floor sculpture of an American flag composed of shell-casings, shot glasses, animal bones, and sundry other objects de kitsch. Both were highlights of the two artists' adjoining the first solo shows at the gallery.

"I moved here in 2006, before I even knew the New Museum was coming," Jimi Dams, the gallery director told us. "It had nothing to do with the museum. I just felt that Chelsea was turning into a horrible art mall and had to get out of there."

Another outlet for emerging talents, Never Work Gallery, occupying a tiny storefront at 191 Henry Street, seemingly specializes in intimate-scaled painterly abstraction akin to the Neo-Naturalism of Gregory Amenoff and Bill Jensen. Gallery director Siobhan Lowe told a reporter she has to work seven days a week, sometimes moonlighting as an accountant, to make the rent—which may be why we had to view the show through the window when we stopped by one day during business hours.

"Must be a great show," said a bearded dude in a derby and black frock-coat, as he passed by and noticed us with our noses pressed against the glass. Above the waist he looked much as his great grandfather must have when he landed on Ellis Island; but his shredded jeans and western boots were strictly hipster.

Like the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, a former tenement now divested of tenants, where actors in period costumes give walking tours of the past, his get-up made perfect sense in a neighborhood that increasingly seems like an ironic living diorama.

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For an institution sporting an audacious facade of six precariously staggered silver boxes, one emblazoned with the slogan "Hell, yes!" in rainbow-colored bubble-letters, the New Museum of Contemporary Art can be awfully unfrivolous. Granted, the museum's inaugural survey of collage and assemblage, "Unmonumental," was predictably raucous. But that its first two solo shows, concurrent exhibitions by Tomma Abts and Paul Chan, could hardly be called crowd-pleasers seems to bode well for its potential to rise above the obvious.

Born in Germany, now based in London, where she was awarded the prestigious Turner Prize in 2006, Tomma Abts is a painter of small, precise geometric abstractions. Unlike the large scale narrative Neo-Expressionism practiced by Neo-Ranch's' followers in the Leipzig School, her work has no novelty value whatsoever. Yet its intimate rewards are many for those who find pleasure in precise interplays of form and color, tactile pentimento (resulting from a process that involves numerous smooth layers of acrylic and oil pigments), and subtle illusions of space, light, and shadow.

Shadows, real rather than illusory, are an even a more prominent element in the Hong Kong born American artist Paul Chan's digital wall and floor projections first exhibited in the 2006 Whitney Biennial. Chan's pieces are quaintly kinetic, as though cast by an antique "magic lantern," lending them a seance-like sense of mystery, as phantom birds soar over silhouetted telephone poles and fruits float up from a bowl until it is empty. As far as digital projections go, his playfully occult pieces are a lot more lyrical than Tony Oursler's rubbery lips that sneer at the viewer, "What are you looking at? I'll fuck you up!"

The very location of the New Museum seems to call out for an ironic detachment to match its Pop facade— if only to avoid descending into unfashionable humanist bathos or bitter social satire. Either that or settle for the steady diet of sensationalism on which so many other museums are forced by the short attention span of an over-entertained populace to subsist. The Abts and Chan exhibitions, however, suggest a commendable sense of formal focus amid the distractions of a thoroughfare where one can still pass from the fashionable to the flea-bitten within a single block; from crowds of strolling fashion victims wearing their affluence on their backs to a lone soul in putrid ratters, sitting on a box outside the Salvation Army Christian Corps, studiously picking at running sores on his grossly swollen legs.

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My classic "there goes the neighborhood" moment came about four or five years ago, while subjecting my wife to one of the periodic walking tours that she wryly refers to as my "sentimental journeys." We had already swung by the settlement house on Henry Street, where there used to be afternoon art classes to keep us off the streets and Friday night dances that often ended in gang fights. I had pointed out where our building had been; where my grandfather kept a pigeon coop on the roof and would stand out on the ledge, why and tearless, swinging a long bamboo pole to conduct his swirling flock high above the tenement tops. We had walked through the courtyard of the Vladeck Houses, where my friends and I would harmonize a cappella to rhythm and blues tunes in the acoustical project hallways and stairwells. And I had shown her the rubble lot on Clinton Street, where the 7th Precinct used to be, and where my friend Ronnie and I had spent several hairy hours in a holding pen, being interrogated and terrorized by a pair of drunken detectives over a stupid misunderstanding, until our parents were called out of bed to come and collect us.

Next, I intended to have Jeannie help me pick out a leather jacket in the same place where I once bought one that T wore in high school. But when we got to Orchard Street, we suddenly found ourselves engulfed by an outdoor fashion show put on by one of the East Village-style boutiques that were just then beginning to replace a few of the old bargain stores - robotic "house" muzak blasting; bodaciously sashaying punkette models trailed by a video crew— and I knew right away that this was the beginning of some kind of end.

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The forces of civic promotion were working overtime one recent Tuesday afternoon. The eager BID PR kids were busy handing out the "Go East LES Shopping & Dining Guide" in their storefront visitor's center on Broome Street. And on Orchard Street, the gift shop of die Tenement Museum was as crowded as the D-train at rush hour, doing a brisk business in LES t-shirts, nostalgic picture books, and historical tchotchkas like the authentic replica of an 1800s "NO IRISH NEED APPLY" sign that we couldn't resist picking up as a birthday gift for our design and production ace Karen Mullen.

"How long do you think it will take for this place to turn into Whole Foods?" Jeannie asked later, as we strolled through the cavernous Essex Market, another throwback to my childhood, where there's now an art gallery, cleverly named Cuchifritos, among the stalls selling everything from Goya canned beans to Calvin Klein jeans.

Looking around at some of die more trendy vendors, including a fancy chocolatier, that have cropped up among the older ethnic fruit stands, fish stalls, and botánicas, I knew what she meant: How long before that Hispanic couple huddled with their little daughter among hanging sport coats and parts' dresses, eating arroz con polio our of aluminum takeout-trays behind a proud display of their wedding pictures, will no longer be able to afford die rent on their tiny clothing stall?

Cuchifritos, on the other hand, will probably be around for awhile—at least until the upscale bare, clubs and boutiques are such a draw that the neighborhood doesn't need the cultural panache of art galleries anymore. In the meantime, Cuchifritos was staking its claim on avant gardeness with "If There Ever Was: an exhibition of extinct and impossible smells."

It consisted of seven "olfactory images" contained in objects that resembled deodorant sticks and were lined up on a table for visitors to pick up and sniff. Accompanying texts told us that their scents had been created by "some of the most renowned 'trained noses' in fragrance design." These scents were meant to evoke subjects ranging from the aftermath of the atomic blast at Hiroshima to wild plants rendered extinct by deforestation to a convicted murderer's last meal to a bottle of perfume discovered in a leather satchel on the ocean floor after the Titanic sank. To one viewer whose olfactory perceptions were perhaps not as subtle as they should have been, however, they suggested nothing so much as seven different brands of glue stick-

More evocative in teems of its site-specific historical relevance was the exhibition on the ground floor of Sol Moscot Opticians, which has recently been turned into a gallery featuring blown-up family snapshots and vintage photographs of the Lower East Side from the '30s, '40s, and '50s by Sol himself. Starting with a patriarchal white- bearded portrait of his father, Hyman Moscot, who started selling ready-made eyeglasses from a pushcart on Orchard Street shortly after arriving from Eastern Europe in 1899, the pictures chronicle four generations of the family, which has been in business on the Lower East Side for 90 years.

Especially fascinating is a black and white print called "Grandma Sylvia Coming Home from a Cruise in 1949," showing a woman in a mink coat with bleached blond hair and shoulders like a linebacker coming through a door like gangbusters, the noir silhouette of a man's fedora risible behind her. She is wearing dangling earrings and ornate sunglasses. Her painted lips form a big "O" as two small children rush to embrace her. It is an image worthy of Diane Arbus.

Along with the photographs, several pair of vintage eyeglasses, encased in Plexiglas and labeled "Moscot Originals," hang like sculptures on die walls, and a suitably scruffy young man named Jacob Morris has been installed as a gallery receptionist.

"I get paid to sit on my butt all day and do nothing," he says with a shrug and a sly hipster smile. "Hey, I'm not complaining, man!"

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"Maybe they don't like our facade," Shalom Neuman was musing, referring to the funky spray-painted metalwork swarming the front of die Fusion Arts Museum, at 57 Stanton Street, as he stood inside, surrounded by his eerie "Toxic Paradise" landscapes, neon-lit oil slicks and swampy landfills limned with a perverse finesse reminiscent of the Hudson River School masters, albeit updated with flashing lights and barnacled with super hero plastic figurines.

Hugely talented, a true pioneer of hyper-kinetic multimedia, Shalom shrugged off the slight like the old school bohemian that he is: what do you expect from The System?

Meanwhile, his more volatile manager Deborah Fries was Rining about taking a costly ad with Art in America, only to have Shalom's show ignored and their venue left out of the magazine's guide to "Selected LES Galleries." After all, Fusion Arts was already here in die early '80s, showing multimedia, multidisciplinary work that Deborah refers to as "assemblage on steroids" decades before the LES gallery scene exploded. Besides the legendary ABC

Rio, it's the only surviving pioneer of the East Village era, even though Stanton Street was so deep in the belly of the beast that it frequently got left out of die Alphabet City roll call as well.

Even the Abrons Arts Center of The Henry Street Settlement and the Art Gallery of The Educational Alliance, neighborhood social organizations that date all the way bark to the first waves of immigrants before die turn of the century, have been included in the gallery guides and benefited from all the recent LES publicity, while Fusion Arts has once again been overlooked; So you have to wonder: Could Shalom be right? Could it be that funky facade, so proudly redolent of anti-establishment chic, looks radically out of sync with the pristine, white-walled "professionalism" of its neighbors?

Four doors down, former 57th Street resident Luxe Gallery's neat white cube at 53 Stanton Street was featuring Amelie Chabanncs's reptilian neo-pointillist self-portraits on wood and weird little waxen heads. Next door at the same address. Smith Stewart Gallery, run by a former curator for P.S. 1, Los Angeles artist Georganne Deen was showing whimsical oils depicting romantic entanglements between nubile nymphs and furry animals suggesting the doodled loose-leaf fantasies of especially wicked adolescent girls.

No one is even trying to pretend that the LES scene constitutes any kind of indigenous upstart movement – not when a big, established gallery like Janos Gat deliberately moves down from the Upper East Side in order to be close to the New Museum, and therefore convenient to visiting curators. In its generous space at 195 Bowery, Gat recently mounted a show of Israeli-born realist Ra'anán Levy's large oils of chillingly anthropomorphic stainless steel sinks, their drain-holes suggesting gaping mouths and eye sockets, their faucets leaking rusty water, evoking bloody noses or diseased penises.

On street-level in the same building, DCKT Contemporary, another established venue relocated from Chelsea, showed photographs and videos by Josh Azzarella, in which significant details of familiar news images and film footage were altered to provoke unexpected emotional responses. Particularly affecting was Azzarella's catch-your-breath-then-sigh with relief video sequence in which the members of a road crew working on a downtown street suddenly look up in unison to watch a plane fly harmlessly past the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center.

At Lehmann Maupin, 201 Chrystie Street (which also maintains a branch in Chelsea) a large abstract mixed media work called "A Midsummer Night's Dream (after Shakespeare and Mendelssohn)" had personal meaning for me, since it was credited to "Tim Rollins & K.O.S. with the Henry Street Settlement kids." How cool to see big time gallery representation for kids from the same inner city social agency where I learned, almost a lifetime ago, to take fine art almost as seriously as E.C. Comics!

The long-term vitality of the LES scene, however, will depend not on the major dealers who establish outposts downtown to be in profitable proximity to the "action," but with smaller grass-roots venues like Gallery 128, 128 Rivington Street, where Namiyo Kubo, who was trained in traditional painting in her native Japan but became an abstract artist after moving to New York in 1982, recently showed her "Water Series," vibrant gestural compositions on wall-size sheets of handmade paper. Gallery 128 also periodically presents events by innovative figures such as vivacious downtown performance diva Vernila Nemeč and avant garde dancer Yoshiko Chuma, drawing crowds that often spill out onto the sidewalk from its small storefront space.

Among other new and promising galleries is Number 35, confusingly located at 39 Essex Street, a tiny storefront a few doors down from G&S Sporting Goods, where I once bought a pair of flashy swim trunks for a career as an amateur boxer in the Police Athletic League (soon to be abruptly aborted by a single bout with a scrappy colored kid who looked like he had rickets). At Number 35, we saw further evidence of the tendency of even the more modest LES venues to import international talent as well as recruiting artists locally. An art duo from Berlin called Kreissl & Kerber had filled the entire space with a site-specific installation called "First Thing Tomorrow Morning." Comprised of plywood planks, shards of foam core, snapshots of demolition sites, and computer-generated vector-drawings suggesting scaffolding, the installation recreated what the artists call the "supporting constructions and temporary structures" one encounters in "fragile architectural landscapes."

The poignant sense of urban flux that the installation evoked reminded me of walking over to Essex Street just a few minutes earlier from Orchard Gallery, 47 Orchard Street, where we had just seen an exhibition of portrait drawings by Amy Sillman. As we stepped out of the gallery, a young boy nearby yelled several times up to a tenement across the street. Finally, a woman appeared in one of the windows and dropped down to him something wrapped in paper that made a smacking sound when it landed in the gutter.

"That was a common thing when I was growing up down here," I told my wife. "If you wanted to buy something from the candy store, you'd call up to your mother and she'd ball some change up in a piece of newspaper and Hi-op it down to you. We called it 'air mail.' It's the same term people used when they tossed garbage out the window into the air-shaft."

Then Jeannie pointed out to me how the tenement was hemmed in on both sides by other structures surrounded by scaffolding and shrouded like Christos in that yellow Tyvek material that makes buildings under renovation look gift-wrapped. And once again the vanished world of my childhood felt

as atmospherically dreamy, distant, and imaginary as Herbert Asbury's classic tome of tabloid sociology, "The Gangs of New York."

For a kid growing up in this then still-provincial neighborhood in the 1960s, after all, the rickety Rube Goldberg contraption at the Streit Matzo factory, on Rivington street, that ran the matzos along a conveyor belt after they came out of the ovens and cut them into uniform sheets to be boxed, seemed like one of the mechanical wonders of the world. On warm summer nights, they'd roll the big corrugated steel door up to let the heat from the ovens out and the mouthwatering fragrance of fresh-baked unleavened bread would permeate the surrounding blocks, luring us in to sample the broken matzos that the bakers tossed into big barrels for the taking

Those pleasant memories were evoked momentarily when we walked into the inaugural exhibition of the Simon Preston Gallery, in its impressive new space at 301 Broome Street, where an installation by Daniel Joseph Martinez occupied the entire front room. It consisted of a machine that appeared to be of similar dimensions to the one at the old matzo factory, with similarly complex configurations of pulleys and belts in constant motion. Only, the function of this mechanical marvel was to position and aim a dead rabbit with the pointing linger of a prosthetic hand sucking out of its snout, spewing buckets of fake blood all over the walls and floor, implicating the viewer according to the gallery press release, in "a spectacle of violence" that "fuses the body horror of Cronenberg sci-fi with a mutating Nietzschean uber-man."

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Since real estate now determines so much of the reality of the New York art world, Rental Gallery, in a loft on the sixth floor of a tenement at 120 East Broadway that used to be an illegal Chinese gambling casino, may be one of the most relevant venues—at least conceptually.

"So let me make sure I understand this," I said. "You rent the gallery to other galleries from out of town who want to put on shows in New York?"

"Most of them are from Europe, a couple from L.A.," the gallery director, Joel Mesler, said from behind his high white reception desk, where he sat with a silent, enigmatically smiling young female assistant. Like a lot of the other more marginal entrepreneurs in the Lower East Side art scene, they looked like they were waiting for their ship to come in. He seemed to be growing a beard to pass the time.

"It's cool that you're so up-front about it," I said. "A lot of galleries don't like to admit they rent their space."

"I suppose we're sort of transparent," he said with a little laugh. The show was by Miriam Thomann and Jan Timme. Called "In and Out of Context," it was presented by Galerie Christian Nagel, based in Cologne and Berlin. The gallery space, just to the right of the reception area, was empty except for a couple of tall mirrors leaning against a couple of the walls, as though waiting to be installed. If you looked into the mirrors from certain angles you could see, outside one of the windows, a sign affixed to the face of the building: five illuminated white plastic squares held together by a vertical metal bar, each containing a single red letter, spelling out the word "ANGEL." (It would only dawn on me later that it was a play on the name of the visiting gallery "Nagel.")

Beyond the sign was a bird's eye-view of East Broadway, looking south to where the Twin Towers used to dominate the skyline. This is an especially bustling midsection, popular with the Fukianese, the

most recent immigrants from China, people of whose irrepressible vitality the long-resident Cantonese and the ABC's (American born Chinese) often seem somewhat wary.

On Tuesday, the big day for gathering on East Broadway, droves of Fukianese come all the way from Philadelphia, Washington D.C., and god knows where else on the take-your-life-in-your-hands economy express buses. Young women who work for the bus companies stand out on the sidewalk, chanting, "Going to D.C.? Going to Philly" Some of them practically push you onto the buses, even if you're a "lo fan" (foreign devil). They're determined that you should go to Washington or Philadelphia whether you have business there or not!

The Fukianese come in to fraternize with other Fukianese who live in Chinatown; to hang out in the crowded mall under the Manhattan Bridge; to shop for clothes and food items to take home with them; to gel 1970s-slyic shag haircuts in the unisex salons; to eat dumplings in the bakeries along East Broadway. Some of them even come to get married. The store- front wedding salons like Just Pretty Bridal offer a package deal: For a set fee you can rent the gowns and tuxes for the entire wedding party-. They do everybody's hair right there in the store and take them uptown in ribbon-fèstooned stretch limousines for a photo session in Central Park.

Afterward, they all return to Chinatown for a banquet in one of die more moderate-priced restaurants, a big photo blow-up of the bride and groom displayed on an easel in the entryway. Then the gowns and tuxes are returned to the store and everybody gets back on the bus, much in the manner of Cinderella's coach turning into a pumpkin.

I once saw a beautiful little bride daintily lift the hem of her gown to seep over a puddle, as she alighted like a butterfly from the limo. Under her rented wedding finery, she wore big, clumsy work boots.

"Interesting show," I told Joel Mesler. "Very evocative."

"Glad you enjoyed it."

"I think I'll take the catalog," I said, handing him two dollars.

"Great," he said. "Make sure that one has the postcard in it."

After we left, I imagined him saying to his silent, smiling assistant, "Now we can buy some dumplings."

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